

How the Physicist Should Define: Asclepius' Interpretation of *Metaphysics* E 1. 1026^{a2–3}

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In the 6th century Asclepius¹ produced the only Greek commentary on *Metaphysics* E that has survived from Antiquity² when he wrote down and edited, maybe with some personal additions, the classes taught by his master Ammonius in Alexandria.³ Even though Asclepius' commentary exhibits some scholastic features⁴, and might be considered less interesting from a philosophical point of view than that of Syrianus (which covers only books B, Γ, M, N),⁵ it nevertheless, as C. Luna aptly puts it, “gives us an essential testimony on the growth of Aristotelian philosophy and exegesis” in the Alexandrian philosophical milieu.⁶ In the following paper, I would like to show that this exegesis could sometimes be quite original, by first drawing attention to a very peculiar interpretation recorded by Asclepius of a seemingly trivial phrase contained in *Metaphysics* E 1, and then discussing the possible textual basis of such an interpretation, as well as its overall soundness. The phrase that Asclepius reads in an atypical manner is found in lines 1025^{b28–1026^{a5}}, where Aristotle tries to explain how natural things should be defined. I shall first quote the whole passage from the *Metaphysics*, then the relevant section from Asclepius' *théoria*, and finally his *lexis* on 1025^{b28–1026^{a5}.⁷}

1. For a summary of what we know about the life of Asclepius, see H.-D. Saffrey, “Asclépius,” in R. Goulet, ed., *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques I* (Paris, 1989), 633–34.

2. We still have all of Asclepius' commentary, which covers books A to Z.

3. A thorough demonstration of the fact that Asclepius' work comes “from the voice” (ἀπὸ φωνῆς) of Ammonius is given by C. Luna, *Trois études sur la tradition des commentaires anciens à la Métaphysique d'Aristote* (Leiden, 2001), 99–103.

4. See C. Luna, *Trois études sur la tradition des commentaires anciens*, 143.

5. See C. Luna, “Les commentaires grecs à la Métaphysique,” in *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques. Supplément*, ed. R. Goulet (Paris, 2003), 255.

6. C. Luna, “Les commentaires grecs,” 255. This is my translation of Luna. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of secondary literature and Greek texts in this paper are mine.

7. The division of each lesson of a commentary in two parts, a *théoria* and a *lexis*, is common in Alexandrian exegesis (on this method of exposition, see A.Ph. Segonds, *Proclus. Sur le Premier Alcibiade de Platon*, vol. I [Paris, 1985], XLIV). The *théoria* is an explanatory preface: it “proposes a [general] analysis of a section of Aristotle's text, by presenting its subjects and its

In *Metaphysics* E 1, we read:

Now, we must not overlook the mode of being of the essence and of its definition, since to inquire without doing this is like doing nothing at all. Among things defined, i.e. among essences, some are like the snub, and some are like the concave. These things differ because the snub has been grasped with matter (for the snub is a concave nose), whereas “concavity” has been grasped without sensible matter. If then all natural things (e.g. nose, eye, face, flesh, bone, and, in general, animal; leaf, root, bark, and, in general, plant) are spoken about in much the same way as the snub is spoken about (for **of none of these things is the definition without motion; they always have matter**), it is clear how we must seek and define the essence in the case of natural things.⁸

In his *théoria* on 1025^b–1026^a32, Asclepius proposes the following summary, which actually contains quite a few explanations, and clearly goes beyond the letter of Aristotle’s text:

Therefore, the physicist must speak about forms in matter, and he must also tell their differences. E.g., he must say not only that the **shape** of the hand is such as this, but he must also tell about its **activity**, e.g. that **it is capable of grasping and throwing**. For if he were to tell only about the **shape**, **it would be no different than if he was speaking about the hand of a statue**. The same is true for the eye. The physicist must not only say that **it is spherical**, but also mention its **activity**, e.g. that **it is capable of grasping the colors**. The physicist, then, must mention not only the **shapes**, but also the parts’ **activities**, for **otherwise nothing would be defined, except equivocally**.⁹

main difficulties, without going into the details of the literal exegesis.” The literal exegesis is given in the *lexis*, “where the section of the text examined in the *théoria* is divided in parts of various lengths” (C. Luna, *Trois études sur la tradition des commentaires anciens*, 104).

8. δεὶ τὸ τί ἡνὶ εἶναι καὶ τὸν λόγον πῶς ἐστι μὴ λανθάνειν, ὡς ἀνευ γε τούτου τὸ ζητεῖν μηδὲν ἐστι ποιεῖν. ἔστι δὲ τῶν ὄριζομένων καὶ τῶν τί ἐστι τὰ μέν ὡς τὸ σιμὸν δ' ὡς τὸ κοίλον. Διαφέρει δὲ ταῦτα ὅτι τὸ μὲν σιμὸν συνειλημένου ἐστι μετὰ τῆς ὑλῆς (ἔστι γάρ τὸ σιμὸν κοίλη ρίς), ἡ δὲ κοιλότης ἀνευ ἥλης αἰσθητῆς. εἰ δὴ πάντα τὰ φυσικὰ ὄμοιώσις τῷ σιμῷ λέγονται, οἷον ρίς ὄφθαλμὸς πρόσωπον σάρξ δύστον, ὅλως ζῷον, φύλλον ρίζα φλοιός, ὅλος φυτόν (οὐθὲνὸς γάρ ἀνευ κινήσεως ὁ λόγος αὐτῶν, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ἔχει ὑλην), δῆλον πῶς δεῖ ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς τὸ τί ἐστι ζητεῖν καὶ ὄριζεσθαι (1025^b–1026^a). The text that I am quoting is that of W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924). My translation of these lines of the *Metaphysics* has been aided by prior translations, in particular the perceptive one of Ross himself (in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes [Princeton, 1984]). Unfortunately, there is no translation of Asclepius’ commentary in any modern language. Here and after, phrases of the translations which are in bold are the ones that are of primary interest to us.

9. δεῖ οὖν τὸν φυσικὸν διαλέγεσθαι περὶ τῶν ἐνύλων εἰδῶν καὶ λέγειν καὶ τὰς διαφορὰς αὐτῶν, οἷον οὐ μόνον δεῖ λέγειν περὶ τοῦ σχήματος τῆς χειρὸς ὅτι τοιόνδε, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτῆς, οἷον ὅτι ἐστὶν ἀντιληπτικὴ καὶ ἀποβλητικὴ εἰ γάρ μόνον περὶ τοῦ σχήματος εἴποι, οὐδὲν ἔτερον λέξει ὡς ἀν εἰ καὶ περὶ χειρὸς ἀνδριάντος διαλέξεται. Ομοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ ὄφθαλμοῦ οὐ μόνον δεῖ λέγειν ὅτι σφαιρικός ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτοῦ δεῖ μνημονεύειν, ὅτι τὸ ἀντιληπτικὸν τῶν χρωμάτων. ὥστε δεῖ τὸν φυσικὸν μὴ μόνον τῶν σχημάτων μνημονεύειν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τῶν μορίων, ἐπεὶ οὕτως οὐδὲν ἔσται ὄριζόμενος, εἰ μήτι γε ὄμωσύμος (361.8–17). The text that I am quoting is that of M. Hayduck, *Asclepii in Aristotelis metaphysicorum libros A-Z commentaria*, CAG VI.2 (Berlin, 1888).

Then, in his *lexis* on 1025^b28–1026^a5, he writes:

The physicist must know the definition of the thing about which he is speaking, and he must know its differences (for without these the truth does not prevail), just as the architect must know the difference of stones and woods, and the doctor must know the differences of bodies and temperaments, if he intends to be a real doctor. Therefore Aristotle says that some definitions are like the snub that is in the nose, since never, even conceptually, they can be separated from their matters; while some definitions are like the concave, since conceptually they can be separated. This is why Aristotle says that these things differ from one another, because the snub has been grasped [with matter] ([he says this] instead of [saying] “not even conceptually is it separated from matter”), for the reason that, in effect, it exists with matter (for the snub is nothing but a concave nose), whereas “concavity” exists without sensible matter. And Aristotle was right, by means of this definition, to say “sensible.” Just as the premises are said to be the “matter” of the syllogism, so too the definition, because it is different from the form, comes to be the “matter” of “concavity”, and [this definition] is the account, which is why it is not a sensible thing. But if I say that the plane figure is like this, I give its definition without using in addition sensation. If then all natural things (e.g. nose, eye, face, flesh, bone, and the other parts of the living being) are spoken about in much the same way as the snub is spoken about, since not even conceptually they can be separated from matter, but are considered in one and the same subject (and the same is true for the leaf, the bark, the fig, and, in general, the plant)—this is because the **definitions of these things cannot be given without motion, i.e. without “activity,” as we were saying;¹⁰ for it is possible to define artifacts without their activities, since they are motionless, but it is not possible in the case of natural things**—, therefore, we have learned from these considerations how we must define natural things. With their **shapes**, we must mention their **activities**.¹¹

10. In the *theoria*.

11. Δεῖ δέ τὸν φυσικὸν εἰδέναι τὸν ὄρισμὸν τοῦ πράγματος, περὶ οὐ ποιεῖται τὸν λόγον, καὶ τὰς διαφορὰς αὐτοῦ (ἄνευ γάρ τούτων τὸ ἀληθὲς οὐ κατορθοῖ), ὡσπερ καὶ τὸν οἰκοδόμον δεῖ εἰδέναι τὴν διαφορὰν τῶν λίθων καὶ τῶν ξύλων, καὶ τὸν ἴατρον τὰς διαφορὰς τῶν σωμάτων καὶ τῶν κράσεων, εἰ μέλοι τῷ ὅντι ἴατρος εἶναι. Φησὶν οὖν ὅτι οἱ μὲν τῶν ὄρισμάν οὔτες ὑπάρχουσιν ὡς τὸ σιμὸν τὸ ἐν πίνι, μηδὲ τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ δυνάμενοι ποτε χωρίζεσθαι τῆς ὥλης, οἱ δὲ ὡς τὸ κοίλον, δυνάμενοι κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν χωρισθῆναι. Διό φησιν ὅτι διαφέρουσιν ἀλλήλων ταῦτα, ὅτι τὸ μὲν σιμὸν συνειλημένον ἔστιν, ἀντὶ τοῦ οὐδὲν κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν χωρίζεται τῆς ὥλης, ὅτε δὴ μετὰ τῆς ὥλης ὑπάρχον (ἔστι γάρ τὸ σιμὸν οὐδὲν ἔτερον ἢ κοίλη ρίς), ή δὲ κοιλότερς ἄνευ ἥλης αἰσθητῆς ὑπάρχει. Καλῶς δὲ ἐπεὶ τὸ αἰσθητῆς διὰ τὸ ὄρισμόν, ὡσπερ αἱ προτάσεις εἶναι ὥλη λέγονται τοῦ συλλογισμοῦ. οὔτες δὲ καὶ ὄρισμὸς ἔτερον ὃν τοῦ εἰδους ὥλη γίνεται τῆς κοιλότητος. οὔτος δὲ ὁ λόγος, διό οὐκ αἰσθητὸν πρᾶγμα ὑπάρχει. ἐάν δὲ εἴπω σχῆμα ἐπίπεδον τοιώδεσδε ὑπάρχον, λόγον εἴπου μὴ προσχρησάμενος αἰσθήσῃ. εἰ τοίνυν πάντα τὰ φυσικὰ πράγματα ὄμοιώς τῷ σιμῷ λέγεται, οἷον ρίς, ὀφθαλμός, πρόσωπον, σάρξ, ὄστον, καὶ τὰ ἄλλα τοῦ ζῶου μόρια οὔτε κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν δυνάμενα χωρισθῆναι ἀλλ’ ἐνί καὶ τῷ αὐτῷ ὑποκειμένῳ θεωρούμενα, ὄμοιώς δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ φύλλου καὶ φλοιού καὶ συξῆς καὶ ἀπλῶς φυτοῦ ὁ γάρ ὄρισμὸς οὐτῶν οὐ δύναται ἀποδιθῆναι ἀνευ κινήσεως, τουτέστιν ἐνεργείας, ὡς ἐλέγομεν. τὰ μὲν γάρ τεχνητὰ δυνατὰ ὄρισθαι ἀνευ τῆς αὐτῶν ἐνεργείας. ἀκίνητα γάρ ὑπάρχουσι· τὰ μέντοι γε φυσικὰ οὐ δυνατόν, ὥστε ἐντεῦθεν μεμαθήκαμεν πῶς δεῖ ὄριζεσθαι τὰ φυσικὰ πράγματα, ὅτι μετὰ τοῦ σχήματος, μημονεύειν δεῖ καὶ τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτῶν (361.40–362.24).

The phrase that Asclepius reads in an unusual way is οὐθενὸς γάρ ἄνευ κινήσεως ὁ λόγος αὐτῶν, ἀλλ' ἀεὶ ἔχει ὑλην (1026^b2–3). The use of the word *κίνησις* by Aristotle in this phrase is explained in the same manner by all modern commentators. As W.D. Ross puts it: “ὑλη = potentiality of change, so that ‘changeable’ is used as synonymous with ‘material’ or ‘sensible’ (A. 989^b31 f., Z. 1036^b28 f.)”¹² But Asclepius gives another meaning to this word, that differs from a mere “potentiality of change.” As he writes in his *lexis*: “it is not possible to give the definitions of these things [natural things] without motion, i.e. without ‘activity’ (ἐνέργεια).” This idea that the definitions of natural things must include their activities was obviously of central importance to Asclepius, since in his *theôria*, he tries to illustrate it by putting forward two examples that are not in Aristotle’s text. The physicist, he explains, must say that the hand “is capable of grasping and throwing,” and he must specify that the eye “is capable of grasping the colors.” He also makes a point of drawing a conclusion from the idea, when, after giving the two examples, he writes that, if the physicist does not mention the activities, “nothing would be defined, except equivocally.”¹³ It should finally be observed that the idea seems to have had an effect on Asclepius’ choice of words. Even though he could appear at first glance to simply read in Aristotle’s text the usual distinction between matter and form, it is striking that, in the lines (both of the *theôria* and the *lexis*) where he does not just paraphrase Aristotle’s text, but instead tries to establish his own point, he never uses the word *ὑλη* (matter), but always the word *ἐνέργεια* (activity). And it is also striking that, in these lines, he never uses the word *εἶδος* (“form”), but always the word *σχῆμα* (“shape”), which he does seem to use in its root meaning of “appearance” or “external shape,” as is shown by the fact that, in the *theôria*, he plainly identifies the *schêma* of the eye with “sphericity,” or by the fact that, according to him, the *schêma* of a living hand is exactly the same as the one of a statue, although it goes without saying that their internal constitutions differ radically.

This whole interpretation on Asclepius’ part is very far-fetched, since there is absolutely nothing in lines 1025^b28–1026^a5 of the *Metaphysics* to suggest that one of Aristotle’s concerns is to stress that the definitions of natural things, as opposed to the definitions of artifacts, should include their activities. In these lines, Aristotle does not mention the activity of “the snub,” and he thinks that, to illustrate his point, it is sufficient to say that the snub must be “grasped with matter,” which simply means that it must be grasped with

12. W.D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, vol. I, 354. See *Physics*, II 2. 193^b31–194^a12.

13. In other words, if the physicist was to try to define the living hand without saying that “it is capable of grasping and throwing,” it would be like “he was speaking about the hand of a statue,” i.e., he would be proposing a definition that could apply to two very different things, that do not belong in the same genus: a living hand and an artificial hand.

“the nose.”¹⁴ In fact, his goal is not to distinguish between *ta phusika* and *ta technēta*, or between physics and art (or some kind of knowledge about the art), but to explain the difference between the ways we ought to define in two different *theoretical* sciences, physics and mathematics.

So where does this interpretation come from? We know nothing about the content of Alexander’s commentary on *Metaphysics* E, since no explicit quotation from it has come down to us.¹⁵ But, even though Asclepius probably had at his disposal all of Alexander’s work, it does not seem that, in his own commentary on book E, he is closely following his illustrious predecessor, since in his explanations on this book “we find none of the characteristics proper to Alexander’s language and style.”¹⁶ In any case, Asclepius’ interpretation on 1025^b28–1026^a5 seems far too unorthodox to come from Alexander, and it is hard to see how it could come from Syrianus, who in all likelihood wrote only on books B, Γ, M and N.¹⁷ It is therefore safe to assume that the interpretation comes from Asclepius, i.e., from himself or from his master Ammonius, who must have developed it by comparing 1025^b28–1026^a5 with other passages from Aristotle which deal with similar topics, since this was the ancient commentators’ favorite exegetical method, especially when they wanted to shed light on the most difficult points.¹⁸ I think that we may get an indication as to one of these passages by reading the lines just before 1025^b28–1026^a5. In 1025^b18–24, Aristotle writes:

Since natural science, like other sciences, is in fact about one class of being, i.e. about that sort of substance which has the principle of its motion and rest present in itself, evidently it is neither practical nor productive. For in the case of things made the principle is in the maker—it is either reason or art or some faculty, while in the case of things done it is in the doer—viz. will, for that which is done and that which is willed are the same.¹⁹

14. It is of course true that the nose is able to breathe, and so that “the snub is able to breath,” but this feature would be out of place in the definition of the snub, since it does not belong to the snub *qua* snub, but *qua* nose.

15. P. Moraux, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen: von Andronikos bis Alexander von Aphrodisias*, vol. III (Berlin/New York, 2001), 491.

16. C. Luna, *Trois études sur la tradition des commentaires anciens*, 108 n. 35.

17. C. Luna, “Les commentaires grecs,” 252.

18. It is well-known, for instance, that Alexander “wanted to explain Aristotle’s [Metaphysics] sentence by sentence with the help of parallel passages from Aristotle himself” (C. Luna, “Les commentaires grecs,” 251). There is a telling remark in Themistius’ *De Anima* paraphrasis: “If the Philosopher’s texts are repeatedly rubbed like tinder, his thought might flash forth” (105.17–18; I am quoting R.B. Todd’s translation [*Themistius. On Aristotle’s On the Soul* (Ithaca, 1996)]). In my “La paraphrase de Thémistius sur les lignes 71 à 1–11 des *Seconds Analytiques*,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 105–16, I have tried to show that this method was used in an implicit way by Themistius in at least one part of his *Posterior Analytics* paraphrasis.

19. ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ ἡ φυσικὴ ἐπιστήμη τυγχάνει οὐσα περὶ γένος τι τοῦ ὄντος (περὶ γὰρ τὴν τοιαύτην ἐστὶν οὐσίαν ἐν ἥτις ἀρχὴ τῆς κινήσεως καὶ στάσεως ἐν αὐτῇ), δῆλον ὅτι οὐτε πρακτική

These lines, where there is a concern with bringing out the difference between natural science and art, recall the beginning of the second book of the *Physics*, where Aristotle gives his famous definition of natural things. Each of the things “constituted by nature,” he says, “has in itself a principle (*όρχη*) of motion (*κίνησις*) and rest, whether in respect of place, of growth and decay, or by way of alteration (*ἀλλοίωσις*).”²⁰ Then he goes on to add: “On the other hand, a bed or a coat, or anything else of that sort, *qua* receiving these designations, and in so far as they are the products of art, have no innate tendency to change.”²¹ In this passage, Aristotle clearly explains the difference between natural things and artifacts in terms of an inner and essential capacity to move locally, quantitatively or qualitatively, a capacity that can probably be understood as including every capacity to act, since, as is explained in the *De Anima*, even the living things’ capacity of going from first to second actuality²² might be conceived as a kind of alteration.²³ Be that as it may, these lines of the *Physics* show that, from an Aristotelian point of view, there is an especially valid point in Asclepius’ explanations of *Metaphysics* 1025^b28–1026^a5. Indeed, since Aristotle does say there that “we must not overlook the mode of being of the essence and of its definition,” and since, according to the *Physics*, the most essential characteristic of natural things, *qua* natural things, is the fact that they have an inner capacity to move, it makes perfect sense to think that, when we are trying to define a natural thing, we must specify its proper capacity to move or act. Moreover, since Aristotle’s example of the snub as “concave nose,” or “concavity in the nose,” does not really bring this out, we can understand why Asclepius wanted to supply other examples where the inner capacity to act is underscored, such as “the eye is capable of grasping the colors.”

Of course, this example of the eye as the organ “capable of grasping the colors” reminds us of *De Anima* II 7, and so points out to another text that Asclepius was probably led to compare to E 1: the well-known passage of *De Anima* I 1,²⁴ where Aristotle is at pains to explain the differences between

ἐστιν οὐτε ποιητική (τῶν μὲν γάρ ποιητῶν ἐν τῷ ποιουντι ἡ ἀρχή, ἡ νοῦς ἡ τέχνη ἡ δύναμις τις, τῶν δὲ πρακτῶν ἐν τῷ πράττοντι, ἡ προσίρεσις· τὸ αὐτὸ γάρ τὸ πρακτὸν καὶ προαιρετόν). This is Ross’ translation that I have very slightly modified.

20. II 1. 192^b13–15.

21. 192^b16–19. They only have one *by accident*, i.e. in so far as they are made out of a natural substance like stone or earth (see 192^b19–23).

22. In the case of the living eye, to use Asclepius’ own example, the sheer capacity to perceive the colors would correspond to the first actuality, while the actual act of seeing the colors would correspond to the second one.

23. See chapter II 5, which explains that the realization of this capacity is an alteration in a derived (and slightly improper) sense.

24. There is no need to remind the reader that the *Physics* and the *De Anima* were two of the most read of Aristotle’s treatises by the Neoplatonists.

the ways the physicist and the dialectician propose definitions of the same objects. In this chapter, Aristotle offers two examples: that of anger and—even though, surprisingly, it is an artifact—that of the house. In both cases, he says, the physicist is “he who in his definition takes account of both [matter and form],”²⁵ i.e., he who takes account, in the case of anger, of the facts that it is a “desire for retaliation or the like”²⁶ and a “ferment (*ζέσις*) of the blood or heat which is about the heart,”²⁷ and he who takes account, in the case of the house, of the facts that it is a “shelter to protect us from harm by wind or rain or scorching heat,”²⁸ a shelter made out of “stones, bricks and timber.”²⁹ It is a detail that generally goes unnoticed in *De Anima* commentaries, but it is true that, on a general level, the material aspects given here for anger (which is of course a *phusikon*) and for the house (which is a *technēton*) differ in that the material aspect of anger does involve some sort of motion (the “ferment” or “boiling”), whereas the material aspect of the house does not include any. Furthermore, this necessity of speaking about the “motion” in the case of anger may seem to be confirmed by the more schematic definition of the phenomenon given a few lines before in the treatise, where it is explained that “passions” are “forms in matter,” and hence must be defined like anger, i.e., as “a certain *motion* (*κίνησις τις*) in a body of a given kind, or some part or faculty of it, produced by such and such a cause and for such and such an end.”³⁰ It is quite obvious that Aristotle is trying here to make mention of the four causes (formal, material, efficient and final), but it is harder to understand the details of this outline of definition. It is certainly clear that “produced by such and such a cause” refers to the efficient cause, and “for such and such an end” to the final one, but the first part of the phrase is not as easy to interpret. For instance, in a footnote to his French translation of the *De Anima*, R. Bodéüs first identifies the formal cause with “a certain motion,” and the material one with “in a body,” but then, just a few lines later, he appears to go back on these identifications, when he writes that according to the materialistic view (which cares only about matter), a passion is a “motion in a body,”³¹ thus now treating “motion” as part of the material cause. We do not have to assume that Bodéüs is contradicting himself, though, because it may be that he, without saying it, thinks—as Hicks did—that *kinēsis* is used by Aristotle to refer to both the formal and

25. 403^b8–9. For the *De Anima*, I have used Hicks’ classic translation (*Aristotle De Anima* [Cambridge, 1907]).

26. 403^a30–31. It is the formal aspect.

27. 403^a31–32. It is the material aspect.

28. 403^b4–5. It is the formal aspect.

29. 403^b5–6. It is the material aspect.

30. 403^a26–27. Hicks slightly modified. The italics are mine.

31. R. Bodéüs, *Aristote. De l’âme* (Paris, 1993), 85 n. 1.

material causes.³² In any case, it was certainly possible, when reading lines 403^a23–b9, to see the *kinésis* as part of the material cause, especially since, in the more elaborated version of the definition given a few lines later, the material cause of anger is spelled out as a “ferment (*ζέσις*) of the blood or heat which is about the heart.” In this more precise version, as Hicks has observed, the “ferment” is an *alloiōsis* or “qualitative change,” and so falls “under the κίνησις of 403^a26.”³³

Asclepius’ interpretation probably bears testimony of an attempt to read Aristotle seriously, but it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that, in one very basic respect at least, it rests on a deep misconception, for, in it, Asclepius appears to be equating “matter” with “activity.” This can be inferred from two facts.

(1) Asclepius, as we have seen, equates “motion” with “activity.” But he could certainly not have failed to notice that, in lines 1026^a2–3, Aristotle is clearly equating “motion” and “matter.” Therefore, Asclepius is bound to accept that “matter” is “activity.”

(2) As anyone can see, Aristotle’s whole point in lines 1025^b28–1026^a5 of the *Metaphysics* is that one who defines natural things must mention their forms with their matters. This conclusion is said to be “clear” in the last sentence of 1025^b28–1026^a5, of which Asclepius gives the following paraphrase: “therefore, we have learned from these considerations how we must define natural things. With their *shapes*, we must mention their *activities*.” It is hard to figure how this paraphrase could not rest on the assumption that “shape” is synonymous with “form” and “activity” is synonymous with “matter.”

But, in the case of natural things, the inner and essential capacity to move or to act is not, according to Aristotle, related to the material cause, but rather to the formal one.³⁴ This is clearly shown in the passage that Asclepius seems to have in mind when, in his *theória*, he claims that, if the physicist does not mention “the parts’ activities,” “nothing would be defined, except equivocally (*όμωνύμως*).” Indeed, in *De Anima* II 1, Aristotle writes: “If the eye were an animal, eyesight (*οψις*) would be its soul, this being the substance as notion or form of the eye. The eye is the matter of eyesight, and in default of eyesight it is no longer an eye, except equivocally (*όμωνύμως*), like an eye in stone or in a picture.”³⁵ What Aristotle is in fact saying here is that

32. As Hicks writes: “This word [*kinésis*] covers at once physical movement and psychical change. And thus the definition which it introduces includes in brief both types of definition, the physicist’s and the dialecticians’” (*Aristotle De Anima*, 199)

33. *Aristotle De Anima*, 201.

34. It is part of the material cause in the case of artifacts, but it is for this very reason that the latter have the capacity only “by accident.”

35. 412^b18–22.

“eyesight” (*opsis*), “the *capacity* to see, i.e. to receive the colors,”³⁶ is the very form of the eye, which stands in contrast with matter, i.e., “the eye” understood in the narrower sense of “the pupil” (ἡ κόρη).³⁷ “Form” is not strictly or mainly, for Aristotle, “the *external shape*”—as Asclepius seems to think in his commentary, where, as we have seen, he only uses the word *schēma*, and never *eidos*, and proposes “sphericity” as the form of the eye—, it is, first and foremost, the inner principle that makes a thing what it is, and, in the case of a natural thing, makes it move or act as it does. If the living eye and the dead eye are homonyms, that is because, although they might have the same matter, the first has a capacity to act that the other has lost. This is what Asclepius failed to grasp. But, as the same example of the form of the eye as the “capacity to see” shows, it was legitimate to want to emphasize the importance of specifying the function or activity in natural science, a fact that the example of the snub, given in *Metaphysics* E 1, perhaps does not sufficiently illustrate.³⁸

36. That *opsis* is to be equated here with the *capacity* is proven by the fact that the soul, with which it is compared, is form in the sense of “first actuality” (412^b5), and by the fact that, in 413^a1, Aristotle writes accordingly that “soul is actuality in the same sense as eyesight and the capacity (δύναμις) of the instrument.”

37. See 413^a2–3.

38. I would like to thank Richard Sorabji for reading an earlier draft of this paper and providing many helpful suggestions. Any remaining mistakes are mine alone.

